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AUTHOR Thomas, Maureen Mulroy: Mikesell, Susan
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses reasons why oral storytelling is a useful technique and presents step-by-step instructions for how to tell a story. Among the advantages discussed are: immediacy, relevancy, versatility, lack of visual stimuli to limit conceptualization, and eye contact. Techniques are presented for three components of the storytelling process: (1) finding a story to tell, (2) learning the story, and (3) telling the story. Variations in these techniques are described for stories taken from different sources including written or filmed stories, stories taken from personal experiences, and stories contrived solely from the imagination of the storyteller. (JMB)

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Oral Story-Telling: The Whys and Hows

A paper submitted by:

Maureen Mulroy Thomas, B.S., M.S.
Institute For Child Study
University of Maryland

and

Susan Mikesell, B.S.N., M.S.W.
Institute For Child Study
University of Maryland

March 1980

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Maureen Mulroy Thomas
Susan Mikesell

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Oral-Storytelling: The Whys and Hows

Recognize these situations?

- The field trip is over. The bus is caught in traffic and thirty, tired preschoolers are beginning to whine, cry and fight.

Billy runs in from the playground crying. When you get him to talk, he tells you that the boys called him, "Fat" and "Jelly Belly."

It's raining. The noise level in the room is increasing and tempers are beginning to flare.

What is a parent or teacher to do?

While many of you might decide to talk to the children involved, or read them an appropriate story or simply grin and bear it, few, we would venture to say, would decide to tell them a story. Yet for the situations mentioned and many, many, more not mentioned, an oral story would be a most practical and appropriate solution. Why? Well for one thing, the oral story is immediate. Time is not spent searching for the right book with the correct moral or ending. Secondly, it is always relevant. A story can be told that is tailored or created to meet the particular needs of a person, group, or situation. Thirdly, the oral story is highly versatile. Stories can be told anywhere, on any subject, for any length of time and for any purpose.

Oral-storytelling is different from the other forms of story presentation utilized by most parents and teachers of young children, such as story books, feltboard stories, and puppet shows in that: no visual stimuli are presented to limit the conceptualization or mental representation of characters and

events; it is a dynamic interpersonal event -- the ideas, thoughts and actions of the storyteller are constantly shaped by the listeners reactions; the storyteller models a form of verbal behavior that can be easily imitated by the audience; it allows the storyteller to maintain eye contact with the group at all times and thus monitor the immediate effect of the story or the flagging attention of the listeners.

While oral-storytelling is a novel idea for many, it must be remembered that is is not a new early childhood educative technique. It is an ancient and venerable tool that has been employed in all societies and cultures for the purpose of educating and socializing the young. Through oral stories, children were taught the history of their people, the structure of their society and the roles and responsibilities of the citizenry. Oral stories were also used to give children access to human experiences and problems and approved models for handling and solving them. As can be seen, these same goals and purposes are appropriate for today's children.

How To Tell A Story

Many of you may be intrigued at this point with the idea of storytelling but are unsure of your talents for this art form. Place your uncertainties aside, for you have been a practicing storyteller for years. Think back to the numerous times you have riveted a friends attention while relating the episodes in a favorite movie or book, or, the times in which you have conjured up laughter and tears in your self and others by reminiscing about past events or people. You were telling stories then and quite effectively. The same skills that served you then will serve you now as you begin to incorporate the art of oral-storytelling into your repertoire of teaching behaviors.

Step 1 - Find A Story To Tell

Stories appropriate for telling can come from many sources -- fairy tales, folk tales, bible stories, myths, fables, story books or personal experiences or imaginings. Ross (1972, p.28) suggests,

> When we think of the storyteller and his story, we tend to think of folk tales and fairy tales; these are the commodities he trades in. But such a view stunts our possible growth in our craft. The range of stories available to us should include anything and everything which we have tasted and touched, felt and seen and heard. In short, all life experiences, whether they come from reading, or listening, or from doing or from imagining are sources for stories.

What is most critical at this step is to find a story that you like enough to share with others.

Step 2 - Learn The Story

The way in which one goes about learning a story depends upon its current form.

A. Written or Filmed Stories

If a story source is in book or movie form, the storyteller should reread or recall the story several times until the plot, characters and spirit of the story come easily to mind. One technique that aids in remembering a story and in preparing it for the telling is to visualize each of its scenes. Where is the story taking place? What does the setting look like? Who or what is the scene? What are they doing? How do they feel? These preparations are like the preliminary sketches of the artist. They are important steps for the creation of a complete picture.

With the exception of a few special phrases -- "Fe, fi, fo, fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman," special beginnings - "Once upon a time in a land far, far away," or special endings -- "Snip, snap, snout, this tale's told out," it is not necessary to memorize a story verbatim. In fact, it should be discouraged since it takes too much time, quickly becomes a chore

and places unnecessary restrictions on the storyteller.

B. Personal Experience Stories

Personal experience stories are tales that are based on events or occurrences that have really happened. They may be the personal experience of the storyteller or the shared experience of the group listening. To learn this type of story steps similar to the ones taken for learning a written or filmed story should be taken. First, the storyteller should choose a story or anecdote that is worth sharing. It doesn't necessarily have to be a wild, zany or happy event. Children enjoy hearing about quiet times, angry times, happy and sad times. Secondly, the teller should mentally recall the event from beginning to end. Questions such as the following will assist in recalling the tale. When did this event occur? Where did it occur? What went on? Who was there? How did I (we) feel? Once the story is completely recalled the teller should answer one more question. Why is this event so memorable? The answer will be the central theme of the story. This theme or reason for telling the story can be used to separate the essential story elements from the superflouous. It will also underscore those areas or parts that need to be emphasized or exaggerated from those that don't. Finally, when preparing a personal experience for a telling, it is important to remember that it is a true story. It really happened. If you stick to the facts, you will have a good, clean storyline -- a most essential requirement for a personal narrative.

C. Off the Top Of The Head Stories (OTH)

Without a doubt, the most difficult type of oral story to do is one that has never existed before, that is, one that is solely the product of the storyteller's imagination. It is different from the written or personal experience story in that there is no plot. The story simply evolves as it is told.

There are a number of ways in which a storyteller can begin an OTH story. She may start by selecting the soon to be invented story's main character. Any person, animal, object or creature will suffice. Laurence of the Blue Light, the littlest white rabbit, the talking asparagus and the forest nixie who lived in the tree are just a few of the characters that have been the focus of an oral story. Once the character is selected he, she or it can be described in as much or as little detail as the storyteller desires and be sent on an adventure. Many of these characters become favorites of the children and the storyteller is frequently deluged with requests for another exciting adventure. This is one of the nicer advantages of this type of story. They lend themselves to serialization.

Another way of beginning an OTH story is to picture an interesting environment and then describe it in detail. It can be a realistic, fantastic or combination type setting. It may be situated in the present or past or future times. When the setting is adequately described, the storyteller can then introduce a series of people, creatures or objects and describe how each effects the environment or, conversely, how each is effected by the environment.

Another effective way of beginning an off the top of the head story is to start by saying something like, "Imagine what it would be like if we..." and then supplying an intriguing ending. Imagine what it would be like if we: lived in a bubble under the sea; came to school on the back of a squirrel or on the top of the bus; lived in a hole deep in the ground; were as light as a feather and blew in the wind!

Once you select your character, setting or format, sit back and enjoy the wanderings of your mind and the spontaneity of the moment. Your previous experiences as a storyteller and the audiences reactions will guide you in weaving these threads into an appealing tapestry.

Step 3 - Tell The Story

Once a storyteller has found a story to share and has learned it, she is ready for the final step -- the telling of it. To insure the best reception of the oral story, the storyteller needs to: situate herself so all of the children's faces can be seen; seat herself in a comfortable and visible position; get the attention of her audience; and, maintain their interest.

The first step allows the storyteller to monitor the audience's reactions. This will provide information about the story's impact, relevance and clarity and allow the teller to make necessary adjustments. The second step assures that a good tale won't be cut short because of backache or tired legs. It also assures that all the listeners will have access to the teller's facial expressions and small body movements which give an oral story that little something extra. When it comes to gaining an audiences attention, there are many techniques or devices that one can use. Some storytellers have a special wrap or hat that they wear when they are about to tell a story. Others may softly ring a bell or randomly strum and pick the strings of a guitar to get the audience's attention. The beginnings of oral-storytelling may be hearalded by a candle lighting ceremony or by placing an invisible talking flea into the ear of the storyteller. Only one's imagination will limit the ways in which young children's attention can be gained. Finally, to insure that the listener's attention is maintained, the storyteller must use her voice -- its inflections, rhythms, volume and pauses -- to set the story's mood and to make the characters come alive. It is not necessary for a story teller to be a trained dramatist or a talented mimic to be effective. Simply modulating your normal speaking voice so that the listeners are able to distinguish dialogue from exposition will be sufficient.

III. Concluding Remarks

Just because oral-storytelling is an exercise with words, don't limit its usage to language related activities only. This technique can be used in conjunction with other educative tools and materials to enhance other areas of a curriculum such as social studies, science, self-awareness and art.

It is also an excellent way to establish a relationship between a child, group of children and a significant adult. Elkin and Handel (1973) remind us that all socialization begins with personal attachment. The relationship forged during oral-storytelling can aid a child in developing a firm, positive sense of self and enhance her ability to learn from others.

Oral-storytelling can also have a powerful role in the healthy psychological development of children. Bettleheim (1976) believes that oral-stories in general and fairy tales in particular provide children with an acknowledgement of inner unconscious pressures and demonstrate acceptable ways of handling them that fit the social and personal structures of their culture. They also provide children's imaginations with new dimensions and situations which would be impossible for them to discover on their own. It would seem then that what an individual child gained from any particular story is determined by her conscious and unconscious interests and needs at the time.

Finally, oral-storytelling helps young children by stimulating the receptive language centers of the brain (located in the left hemisphere) and by encouraging the development of good listening and attending skills. Skills which are important for successful school functioning.

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